Richter, Antje: *Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013, 235 pp., ISBN 978-0-295-99278-5.

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The period of early medieval China, roughly referring to the time from the late Eastern Hàn 漢 dynasty until the re-unification of the Chinese empire under the Suí 隋 and Táng 唐 dynasties (ca. 200–600 A.D.), remains one of the periods of Chinese history that has attracted less scholarly attention than it deserves. Antje Richter's book on the epistolary culture of early medieval China may serve as an example for this observation. While the general image of this period is still one of confusing political and cultural complexity, it is, nonetheless, generally agreed to be a highly important phase whose dramatic changes deeply affected Chinese culture. One historic change that unfolded its full effect during this period was the usage of paper and the subsequent flourishing of manifold literary genres. Among others, the early medieval period is also the first time in Chinese history providing us with not only a few isolated epistolary pieces, but with an "impressive flourishing of letter writing" (p. 11) resulting in a huge corpus of transmitted letters. It is thus the period in respect to which epistolary writings become tangible as a *genre* in the first place. That said, Richter is absolutely right in stating that this period is particularly well-suited as an introduction to Chinese letter writing (p. 11).

The book does not claim to represent an exhaustive survey of all that could be said about early medieval Chinese letters. With 150 pages of text and an additional 40 pages of endnotes, it serves as a first introduction to the topic. Yet, the book offers a significant contribution by making "the social practice and the existing textual specimens of personal Chinese letter writing from this period fully visible for the first time", both for researchers within the field of Chinese studies and for other disciplines engaging in epistolary research (p. 10). In the long run, Richter also hopes that her book may serve as an encouragement for "a more confident and consistent use of letters as historical and literary sources" and for further research in this field (pp. 10–11). This is indeed desirable, since – as Richter clearly demonstrates in her introduction – epistolary research has so far only played a marginal role in Chinese studies, especially if compared to all the research that has been dedicated to other cultures' epistolary writings (pp. 5–7). She also points out that examining letters is by no means a marginal enterprise merely concerning a special genre of Chinese literature,

but that it might yield further "insights into personal communicative culture and the historical, literary, and intellectual developments" (p. 10).

Richter's book is divided into two main parts, of which Part I (comprising two chapters) addresses general aspects concerning "Materials and Concepts of Letter Writing", and Part II (comprising three chapters) engages with "Epistolary Conventions and Literary Individuality".

The first chapter of Part I ("Materiality and Terminology") offers an overview regarding the material, cultural, infrastructural and terminological foundations of early medieval Chinese letter writing.[1] In the sub-section on "Calligraphy and Letter Writing", for example, Richter draws our attention to the importance of aesthetic handwriting as a particular feature of Chinese letter writing, which developed during the early medieval "calligraphic turn" (p. 23). This is an important point, since it shows that letters were (or rather had the potential, for some people, to be) a lot more than "just" information sent from one person to another. In their artistic dimension, letters also bore strong social implications in terms of a distinctive – and *distinguishing* – feature of elite culture.

Since Richter wants to centre her book on personal letters, the last sub-section of chapter 1 aims at finding a definition of personal letters as opposed to official letters. This turns out to be a rather complex task. Richter refers to personal and official letters as "two fundamentally different types of written communication", of which she defines the personal type as being "written because of personal motives and intentions that are largely independent of the writer's official standing" (p. 41). One point which Richter includes into her discussion of these definitional issues is the question in how far early medieval texts themselves differentiated between personal and official letters. On the one hand, Richter acknowledges a "certain hybridity as belonging to the genre" (p. 41) and an "unreliability of genre labels" (p. 40). She explains that personal letters were often labelled as "*shū*" 書, but that "this criterion is not comprehensive enough, because *shū* covers only letters written to equals or inferiors" (p. 40). She further refers to some examples of letter designations showing that "[p]ersonal letters addressed to superiors were often labeled *jiān* 箋/牋 (memorandum), a word used to designate a subgenre of official communication, which, however, was not applied consistently" (p. 40). On the other hand, Richter also claims that early medieval books like Xiāo Tǒng's 蕭統 (501–531) anthology *Wénxuǎn* 文選 and Liú Xié's 劉勰 (fl. 5th century) *Wénxīn diāolóng* 文心雕龍, medieval China's outstanding work on literary thought, do indeed distinguish

1 The chapter is divided into five subheadings: "The spread of paper", "Calligraphy and letter writing", "Writers and transporters of letters", "Terminology", and "The Genre of Personal Letters".

between personal and official letters, since they "treat or collect them in separate chapters" (p. 41). At this point, the reader is left wondering why Richter does not refer to these works more explicitly here, e. g. by citing the particular expressions used by these texts to differentiate between the two. We are, however, informed later on (in the second chapter of Part I, dealing with "Letters and Epistolary Thought") that within the *Wénxīn diāolóng*, personal letters are dealt with in the chapter titled "Shūjì" 書記 (ch. 25). But we further learn that this chapter does not only deal with personal letters, but also with certain kinds of official communication (p. 60), and that the chapter often uses "*shūjì*" even more generally, in the sense of "written records" (e. g., p. 52). While parts of the chapter indeed seem to focus on letters deserving the label "personal", this is definitely not true for the whole chapter, and even the passages that focus on personal letters do not provide us with anything close to a clear-cut terminology. Regarding the alleged differentiation within the *Wénxuǎn*, we get to know (again in the second chapter)[2] the different expressions this work uses for the (mostly hierarchically) differentiated kinds of "official communication", and that within this work, "written communication labeled *shū* [書] is always personal." Furthermore, shortly after classifying the nine "memorandums" (*jiān*) in ch. 40 of the *Wénxuǎn* as a "genre of official communication", Richter also claims that "more than half" of these memorandums "are personal" (p. 64). This suggests that we are not simply dealing with a label "not applied consistently" here. If the *majority* of *jiān* in this chapter is to be classified as "personal", the question arises if *jiān* should be designated as a "genre of official communication" at all. On a more general level, these observations make Richter's above-mentioned assertion (from p. 41) – that the *Wénxīn diāolóng* and the *Wénxuǎn* do differentiate between personal and official letters by treating or collecting them separately – somewhat questionable.

While a more precise discussion of this subject might have been desirable, Richter's exhibition of these "difficulties of definition" (p. 41) nevertheless discloses an important insight: The category of "personal letters", which makes good sense to us today, may not have been equally plausible for people of early medieval China. Maybe the category itself implies a certain kind of thinking about individuals or relations among individuals that was less common in the discourses of early medieval (and even later) times. As demonstrated by the differentiation of letters largely (though not only) based on the hierarchical relationships between senders and addressees (as we find it in the *Wénxuǎn*),

2 Besides the information we find on letter writing in the *Wénxīn diāolóng* and the *Wénxuǎn*, Richter also explores the respective parts of Cáo Pī's 曹丕 (187–226) essay "Disquisitions on Literature" (*Lùn wén* 論文) in this chapter, see pp. 45–47.

social hierarchies played a much greater role than the degree of personal intimacy when different kinds of literary pieces (today referred to as "letters") were to be designated and distinguished. Richter's discussion of these definitional problems thus manifests the importance of scrutinizing our own, modern paradigms – without necessarily having to discard them as analytic tools. Creating a critical distance to our own categories might not only make the earlier categories seem less "unreliable" or "hybrid". Searching for the paradigms behind the earlier categorizations may even reveal some historical insights on its own. Another aspect of this paradigmatic incongruence is explicated by Richter in an illuminating fashion: While our perception of letters, and especially personal letters, is closely linked to the notion of *privacy*, Richter makes the important observation that the letters we know from early medieval China – including those whose contents we are inclined to categorize as "personal" – are characterized by a striking degree of *publicity*: As Richter accurately sums up her findings on this aspect, "we may safely assume that most received personal letters were written in view of a wider audience and probably designed to this end" (p. 43).

One of the biggest challenges that research on the epistolary literature of early medieval China involves (and which Richter openly concedes in her introduction) is the "problematic nature of [its] corpus" (p. 9). Apart from the fact that the transmitted letters are "unlikely to be representative" (ibid.) of early medieval letter writing in general, even more serious objections may be raised regarding their transmissional history. These challenges might be interpreted as so far-reaching as to finally leave the bulk of the book's contents with a question mark. Most of the available letters or letter fragments – a corpus of more than 2000 pieces – have been handed down to us because they were incorporated into historiographical works and literary anthologies from different periods.[3]

3 It would have been helpful for the reader to learn a little more about the composition of this corpus. This especially concerns questions regarding the traceability of the letters' transmission: How many of the letters (or parts of letters) were transmitted in which works or which kinds of works? How many of the letters found in anthologies are traceable back to earlier sources (like histories), that is, the sources the anthologies used to collect the letters? Such information would have conveyed a better overview regarding the paths of transmission as well as the time spans lying between the alleged origin of the letters and the origin of the earliest extant works in which they were transmitted. This additional information might also be desirable for Richter's – generally very helpful – online table of "non-official letters from Early Medieval China" (http://spot.colorado.edu/~richtea/table.pdf; 28/11/2015), where – so far – only the anthologies are listed as sources, that is, besides the few examples from the medieval anthologies *Wénxuǎn* 文選 and *Yìwén lèijù* 藝文類聚, almost exclusively Yán Kějūn's 嚴可均 (1762–1843) *Quán shànggǔ Sāndài Qín Hàn Sānguó Liùcháo wén* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文. The traceable earlier sources, which this anthology used (like medieval dynastic histories), remain unmentioned. Besides the transmitted letters, which constitute the basis for Richter's

Usually, we have no idea how they got in there (pp. 7–8), that is, which intermediary (and potentially tampering) steps we are supposed to imagine between the initial mailing of the letter and its final incorporation into the transmitted works. If we cannot exclude the possibility that the transmitted letters represent altered (i. e. at best only slightly "abridged" or "embellished", see p. 8) versions of the original manuscripts or even (as a worst-case, but by no means far-fetched scenario) utter *inventions* by the authors of the (e. g., historical) works citing them,[4] then any interpretation of the letters' contents and even their treatment as letters becomes somewhat problematic.[5] The invention scenario has often been discussed regarding one of the earliest and most famous Chinese transmitted letters, i. e. the Western Hàn historian Sīmǎ Qiān's 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 86 BC) letter to his friend Rèn Ān 任安, which several scholars have reasonably argued to be an invention by the Eastern Hàn historian Bān Gù 班固 (32–92 AD), who may have inserted it into his *Hànshū* 漢書 as an "artistic device" in order to invoke a certain (and none too complaisant) picture of his precursor Sīmǎ Qiān.[6] There is no offhand reason to assume that such suspicion should be any less applicable to letters found in historiographical texts of early medieval times, in which forged letters (just like the historians' other alleged primary sources) might well have been used by the authors in order to underline or design a certain point of view or narrative.

We need to distinguish, however, between different kinds of approaches to these letters. The problem sketched above is especially grave when it comes to the interpretation of particular contents of letters in relation to the contexts under which they allegedly were written, or when it comes to speculations about conjectured consequences that a letter itself might have engendered in a certain historical situation. A letter by Shěn Yuē 沈約 (441–513) to Xú Miǎn 徐勉 (466–535) that Richter discusses on pp. 99–101 may serve as a case in point:

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book, there is a growing corpus of archaeologically recovered letters from the period (see pp. 9–10). Richter very rarely mentions examples from these archaeological sources and explains that "only the smallest portion of them has been published or is otherwise accessible" (p. 9). She also mentions the "difficulties of deciphering" these manuscripts (p. 10).

4 Richter shortly mentions the "problem of forgery" on p. 9.

5 One doubtful case brought up by Richter herself is Cáo Zhí's曹植 (192–232) famous letter on literature, identified by Richter as a case in which "one may wonder if this text was ever a letter at all or is rather an essay in disguise" (p. 83).

6 On the view of Sīmǎ Qiān's letter being Bān Gù's "artistic device" employed to contrast his own view with Sīmǎ Qiān's, see the recent discussion of this case in van Ess (2014: 685–691), especially pp. 690–691. Richter herself mentions the case of the alleged Hàn dynasty correspondence between Sū Wǔ 蘇武 and Lǐ Líng 李陵, which is "commonly regarded as an early medieval fabrication" (p. 83; p.178, no. 28).

In this letter, Shěn Yuē elaborates on his poor state of health and asks Xú Miǎn to put in a good word for him with the emperor, Liáng Wǔdì 梁武帝 (r. 502–549), hoping that the latter might allow his petition to retire early from his post for health reasons. In the *Documents of the Liang* (*Liángshū* 梁書), the historiographical work via which this letter came down to us, the citation of the letter is followed by the information that, despite Xú Miǎn's intervention, the emperor finally did not accept Shěn Yuē's wish. Having mentioned this alleged background of the letter, Richter brings into play the idea that Xú Miǎn might not only have spoken on behalf of Shěn Yuē in front of the emperor, but that he might have forwarded Shěn Yuē's letter to the throne. Richter then turns to the concrete contents of the letter: At one point, Shěn prognosticates that he might not live for much longer and that "if it goes on like this day after day without stopping, I will leave behind for my Sage Lord [i. e., Liang Wudi] an irrevocable regret" 若此不休,日復一日, 將貽聖主不追之恨. Richter states that the emperor might have perceived this very diction as "presumptuous and almost threatening", and that this "rhetorical flaw" might have led to the emperor's decision not to grant Shěn's wish (p. 101). The whole scenario is, of course, by no means impossible, but yet highly speculative. It hinges upon the diction of a particular sentence (whose threatening potential might as well be contested), found in a letter on which we have no information that it was even made available to the emperor. It might be rendered even more speculative if we take into account the fact that we have no idea where the historiographer got this letter from or in how far he felt free to modify its diction. At any rate, the possibility of the letter being a product of the historiographer's manipulation (in one or the other way) can hardly be surmised to be any more speculative than the above scenario proposed by Richter.

It needs to be stressed, however, that Richter rarely lets herself be carried away to such speculative interpretations concerning the contents of particular letters with regard to their alleged historical contexts. On the contrary, her approach generally features a very cautious handling of the sources. She mostly uses them in exactly the way that – regarding their problematic transmission – suggests itself as most plausible, namely, by distilling some more general phenomena that can be identified as typical characteristics of early medieval Chinese letters. The identification and exemplification of such typical characteristics constitute the pivot of Part II of the book, titled "Epistolary Conventions and Literary Individuality".

The first chapter of Part II ("Structures and Phrases") deals with the typical compositional parts of letters, i. e. letter openings, letter bodies, and letter closings, and, additionally, with terms of address and self-designations typically used in epistolary writings. While many of the transmitted letters came down to

us in an incomplete form missing opening or closing (or both), the examples of those still including these frames suffice to give quite a good impression of how typical epistolary structures must have looked like in early medieval China, and how particular topics like health or weather reports (pp. 89–93) were characteristically woven into these structures.

All of the three chapters of Part II (the other two are titled "Topoi" and "Normativity and Authenticity") abound with well-chosen and carefully translated examples concerning particular characteristics of letters, which Richter uses very successfully to illustrate the epistolary culture of the period. This is especially true for those aspects and examples that make epistolary literature tangible as a genre in itself, like the use of particular phrases, topoi, inter-epistolary references and allusions typically used within the letters. For example, we learn that many early medieval letters refer to earlier epistolary works or letter writers that were obviously regarded as exemplary models or as pioneers of an evolving epistolary tradition, sometimes by explicitly mentioning the writers' names (e. g., pp. 69–70) or by way of subtly alluding to them (e. g., pp. 80–81; p. 107). We further get a vivid impression of how epistolary topoi like "lamenting separation" (pp. 119–127) and "the limits of writing and language" (pp. 134–138) were – sometimes rather conventionally, sometimes more artistically – woven into the fabric of many epistolary writings. And we get to know many established epistolary conventions, like the comparison between the effects of receiving a letter with the mood-enhancing effects of the drug plants *xuān* 萱 and *sū* 蘇, just to give one of the many interesting examples (p. 104). Richter also regularly hints at respective parallels or differences with regard to typical conventions or topoi within the European epistolary tradition.

The book closes with a "Conclusion" (p. 151 ff.), which is presented less as a summary of the previous findings than rather as a meditation on the relevance of epistolary studies in general. While not everybody may eagerly agree with Richter's philosophical insertion that research on letters "may help us to fathom what it means to be human" (p. 153), one certainly must applaud Richter for illustrating with her book the huge potential of letters as sources for many aspects of early medieval Chinese culture. Richter has exemplarily fulfilled her self-imposed task to "make epistolary culture fully visible", and to make "Chinese letters more accessible for future research and appreciation" (p. 152). The whole field, of course, still leaves ample room for further research. First of all, letters are not only promising sources regarding the field of epistolary studies itself, but, as Richter correctly mentions, they provide us with unique information on many aspects of Chinese culture, like language, history, philosophy, religion, everyday life, psychology, medicine, trade, law, etc. (p. 152). As for the field of epistolary research itself, one question that might deserve

attention in the future is in how far we can discern certain historical developments in letter writing, either within the scope of early medieval China or in comparison to later periods: Do typical topics, expressions, phrases, topoi or other conventions change significantly over time? And are there any identifiable regional differences within the corpus of epistolary literature? The archaeologically recovered letters, whose number and accessibility will most likely increase during the next years, also promise to provide many new insights into these issues. Future scholars dealing with any of these topics and questions will certainly not only be encouraged by Richter's book to intensify research on Chinese letters, but they will also benefit greatly from the solid and comprehensive groundwork provided by this important introduction.

Bibliography

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